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A Post-Colonial Study in the Works of RK Narayan

Dr. Shambhavi
Assistant Professor, University Department of English, L. N. Mithila University, Darbhanga 846004, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Shambhavi

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Abstract: In history, we begin to see the violence of colonialism – which was not only political, social, economic, or military but epistemological and cultural too. Colonialism cannot merely be seen as a political or economic system but rather as a powerful cultural and epistemological tool that resulted in the conquest of the native population of non–European countries and, to some extent, over settler colonies which gained acquaintance and knowledge over the native population through the medium of translations, commentaries, and academic studies and later destroyed or modified native system of thinking claiming European languages as the only fit medium which can ensure development, technological advancement, equality and modernization of the human civilization as a whole. The paper attempts to throw light on Narayan's works as a medium that explored in considerable depth the ill effects of colonialism, racism, and exploitation long before the creators of imaginative literature attempted in their works of post-colonial writings.

Keywords: Post-colonial, Epistemological, Third World, Imaginative Literature, Violence.

INTRODUCTION

Nation-building has always been an intense work of cultural construction as artistic, folkloric, philosophical, theoretical, and mythological discourses are also involved in its making. The work was performed in considerable depth by writers of imaginative literature in the first halves of the 1950s and 1960s, who were also involved in the construction. For them, the ill effects of colonialism were so profound that no 'Third-World' literature or critical commentary could have afforded to neglect its impact. These post-colonial studies are instead seen as a strategy to discuss the history of colonialism so that they can critique cultural alienation, the rise of nationalism, attempts and motives of creation of mimic men, the present state of such countries, and their efforts towards decolonization and the imminent threats these neocolonial states are subjected to in the form of homogenization and marginalization of groups, fundamentalism, and ethnic and class strife.

The paper intends to find out Narayan as a writer who critiqued colonialism pre-eminently, which is figured out in the later writings of Indian English fiction and even from the days of the colonial encounter period works of R. K. Narayan had always worked in considerable depth to unearth the effects of colonialism. His writings are replete with numerous examples of how traditional cultures and literature got marginalized in various ways. Narayan has been able to delineate with exquisite

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details between the two cultures of the European and the native identities and how local and native identity worked in opposite and contrary parameters to the construct of universal humanism as contrived by the Europeans rejecting the native system of belief and acknowledging Christianity as the only true faith. This reiterates the deadening homogenization category of colonialism as there is the prevalent notion of categorizing the people, system, belief, and practices as 'the other', which happens to differ from the accepted normative concepts of the Europeans. Narayan has this peculiar quality of scorning in an automated and technocratic society devoid of plurality and diversity of faith. This is evident in the ever-popular Narayan's ***'Swami and Friends***, where Ebenezer, the scripture teacher, discards the native belief as pagan, rejection able, and the preliminary moment of installing their religion and faith as 'The Supreme One:

"Oh, wretched idiots!" the teacher said, clenching his fits. "Why do you worship dirty, lifeless, wooden idols and stone images? Can they talk? No. Can they see? No. Can they bless you? No. Can they take you to heaven? No. Why? Because they have no life."

Benedict Anderson's influential thesis is that nations are imagined. A large number of post-colonial writers, from Rushdie to Mario Vargas Llosa, Nuruddin Farah to V. S. Naipaul, capture the theme that a nation's construction constitutes of discursive construction as myths, dreams, visions, and personality- cults, put together by typical social order, traditions, and customs. In this contested theme, one of the chief tools of Narayan becomes apt, which is the rhetoric of satire. As a boy in *Swami and Friends* when Swami tries to draw the map of Europe, several things come to the mind of an ordinary person who has no responsibility, duty, or acceptance of the place or is not emotionally attached to the place.

"It puzzled him how people managed to live in such a crooked country as Europe…How did the map-makers find out the shape of a country? How did they find out that Europe was like a camel's head?"

The tool of historiography remained a potent weapon in the hands of colonial powers. Reclaiming history is dependent on the reclamation of memory. These layers of memory had remained untouched by colonial historiographers. This nonwestern memory can be called vernacular memory and is consistently found to be collective: racial, ethnic, and communal. These are the works of memorialization of local histories. These are intimately linked to the local topos, community memory, and lived space of a local tribe, clan, or group of people. In post-colonial writings, we see the local space entering the collective memory that links space with racial memory that remained uncorrupted. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura,* Tabish Khair's Investing his mother's kitchen garden, Kavery Nambisan's recreation of Coorg in Karnataka, Lorna Goodison's 'My Jamaica/ my green-clad muse', Michelle Cliff's alternative search of historical memory are all in search of racial, collective, spatial memory. In this respect, Narayan had been successful in creating the Malgudi, which is a microcosm of Indian society, and it enjoys its position not as a geographical locale but as a soul having universal significance through its sociological verisimilitude or vivid physical impression it carries in the sense of average every Indian village. The Spiritual equivalents are The Tirupati, Mempi Hills, river Saryu beyond Nallapa's grove, and a temple in ruins beyond the grove, which has witnessed the rendezvous with many of Narayan's characters are the stories of every Indian village. This Malgudi is the fictional locale of the major novels. To him, it is the real India in miniature. So, what happens in Malgudi happens all over India with regional shades and nuances. As Malgudi symbolizes India, its landscape embodies the structural solidity of Indian reality pervaded by customs and tradition, which shape human identity in the spatial-temporal continuum. The world of Narayan novels thus appears to be a replica of the actual and real linked as it is to our immediate psychic awareness and social experiences. The Chandrans, Krishnan, Margayas, Sampaths, Srinivasan, Savitris, and Shanties are all others, as we obtain in his novels, are in plenty among us yet remain with their individuality. Here, Narayan's depiction of the marketplace is always filled with fresh vigour and enthusiasm, "like the person who goes each day into the heart of his or her community for daily provisions, he, and thereby his reader, always see something new" (Lahiri).

The setting of Malgudi is distinctive and ever-growing with time as a human character. The most extraordinary charm of R.K. Narayanan lies in making Malgudi and its people and their real value to the readers. Some critics believe that the readers of his novels can feel Malgudi growing in succeeding novels. Here, Narayan can create a niche where a community space was made, like the lived spaces of the later post-colonial African novels Soyinka and Achebe. Some other critics imagine

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that the readers of his novels can feel Malgudi growing in their minds with each succeeding novel. Therefore, Malgudi has not remained a geographical entity but a part of a lived continuum and to the effect of a living character. N. Mukherjee finds Malgudi as the real hero of R. K. Narayan's novels. He writes, "One of the significant features of Malgudi's landscape is its river Saryu, believed by Malgudians to have been born of a scratch made by Rama's arrow when he was on his way to Lanka. The sacred river is the town's pride; distinguished visitors are taken to the town hall's roof to glimpse its silvery expanse. The people of the town take strolls on its sand banks. Friendships are made here, old contracts are renewed, and business transactions are finalized. Here, Mani (Swami *and Friends)*, the big bully, waits for Rajam and plans to bundle him up and throw him into the river. Here on the bank of Saryu, Chandran (The Bachelor of Arts) steals a glance at the beautiful Malathi and almost drives him mad. Here, Sampath (*Mr. Sampath), the printer of Malgudi,* relates the story of his failure to Srinivas…. Another important feature of the setting of Malgudi is the market Road, which is, truly speaking, its "Lifeline". It is naturally crowded, noisy, and dirty, as it is a major business centre. Margayya (*The Financial Expert)* is made of different stuff. He belongs to Market Road. The more crowded the place, the better are the prospects of his trade."

In Post-colonial literature, modes of narratives, rhetoric, and linguistic felicity have always got an appeal and an edge over the traditional Western forms, style, genre, and language. Thus, post-colonial literature embodies an interrogative instance and has modified and regenerated many new forms of narratives, rhetorical strategies, and linguistic forms, central to which is the storytelling of folklores depicting the myth and social taboos of the native, indigenous populace. Thus, we get a subverted Western mode of storytelling in the guise of the form of the novel but indigenized in theme, images, and fabric, just a 'nativized' form. In most cultures of Asia, Africa, and South America, there is a rich storytelling tradition: stories are told, legends are enacted, and events of historical importance are performed. Many post-colonial writers have taken their aesthetics from here. We see proverbs, riddles, songs, chants, local legends, and apocryphals from particular clans and communities. Here, we find one thing in particular: meaning is generated here in the time of enunciation, and there is no permanent meaning beyond immediate 'expression', so they were the fit medium to retrieve older meanings for contemporary needs. We see this in abundance in the writings of Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, and Aboriginal writings where old stories and sayings are told to communities. Still, the cautious storyteller critiques social commentary, in which the storyteller guides, cautions, and advises the community. The post-colonial writings of R. K. Narayan can be seen as an attempt to revive this ethnic- culture and tradition as they abound with fables and stories of the ancient Indian past having a plurality, versatility, and immense shades of life. As R. K. Narayan himself asserts, "*The material available to a story writer in India is limitless. Within a broad climate of inherited culture, there are endless variations: every individual differs from every other individual, not only economically but in outlook, habits, and day-to-day philosophy. It is stimulating to live in a society that is not standardized or mechanized and is free from monotony. Under such conditions, the writer only has to look out the window to pick up a character (and thereby a story).*"

Malgudi Days,
Author's Introduction

Narayan's story collection "Under the Banyan Tree" is a collection of stories by 'Nambi' who is an old, self-proclaimed storyteller, who is a weaver of words, who keeps his audience spellbound by the integrity of content and images of his storytelling. This reminds us of the African seer, *Mugo wa Kibiro,* in *The River Between, 'that great Gikuyu seer of old (…) seeing visions of the future and speaking of them to the many people who came to see and hear him'*. Here again, the emphasis is on listening and a community of listeners. Nambi is such a profound storyteller that he never repeats his stories twice, and so he was seen as a mark of respect in his society, "*again and again through the bright half of the month. Kings and heroes, villains and fairy-like women, gods in human form, saints and assassins, jostled each other in the world created under the banyan tree*." But the greatest practice for which the seer is celebrated was his art, as he knew when to stop and took the vow of silence for the rest of his life. When Nambi sensed his dotage, he denounced the art and didn't wait for others to tell him. The Indian Ethos of four ashrams of the Hindu way of life where *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyas* are being laid stressed here. It becomes essential in *Sanatan Dharma* to know the complete cycle of things where indulging in creations is important while the art of coming out of its spell is equally important.

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Most Post-colonial writers got indigenization through the incorporation of local myths, fables, and folklore in the adapted form and infused them with the Westernized form to suit their requirements for post-colonial narratives. Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* draws a parallel and contrast between Yoruba rituals, dramaturgical modes, and Europeans. Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Amos Tutuola draw such mythical conceptions of *ogbanje, and abiku* in many of the post-colonial works.

Together with this, myths and legends of Indian mythology have been used with such skill and organic wholeness by Narayanan that they derive a new meaning altogether. However, these myths also have a political edge as they destabilize the established Western monological forms. Also, these myths are so subtle in composition that they don't behave as external scaffoldings but rather as a part embedded into the whole constitution of the novelist. The actual day-to-day experiences of the lives of the Indian subcontinent are placed in such wholeness by Narayan that they recreate the Indian myths as modern literary fiction rather than a delicate fusion. In this direction minute, observation of William Walsh is quite apt: "The truth is that Hindu myths and religious parables, like D. H. Lawrence's congregational hymns, are not important as theological scaffolding to the fiction but in being part of a whole economy of feeling itself sunken deep into the constitution of the novelist. These things are present not as dogmas of metaphysics but as a part of a mode of perception …They flow in and out of the writer's thought and touch. The religious sense of Indian myth is part of Narayan's grip on reality, his particular view of human life, and his way of placing and ordering human feelings and experiences. What one can say about Narayan without qualification is that he embodies the pure spirit of Hinduism."

Narayan's novels are based on or built around ancient myths, fables, and belief systems. Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi* is a work of his conscious effort to weave it around the myth of *Bhasmasur* and *Mohini*. The novel presents the story of Vasu, embodying a self-destructive, inimical, ferocious spirit carrying within himself a tiny seed of self-destruction like the demon Bhasmasur. However, after a careful study of the novel, it is found that the most significant work of Vasu is to expose the absurd pretensions of Natraj and his bohemian friends, which makes the novel a comic allegory. The novel contains an interplay between two opposed attitudes toward life, but each is shown to be disastrous. There is a sharp contrast between Vasu's devilish egotism and Natraj's self-effacing altruism. *The English Teacher* echoes the fundamental belief of Hindu philosophy- the immortality of the soul. *Mr. Sampath* has been woven around the doctrine of 'disinterested action' i.e. *Nishkamakarma* as embodied in *Gita.* There is also an illusion to the myth of Karma. *The Guide* unfolds the age-old Hindu belief system that Gods can be propitiated and rains can be brought about through piety, penance, fasting, and prayers. In *A Tiger for Malgudi,* Narayan turns to life, death, soul, and rebirth, recurring themes in the novel. The novelist has sincerely observed the ways and manners of human beings in and around the Malgudi Circus and concludes:
"*…. humans have monopolized the attention of fiction writers. Man in his smugness never imagines for a moment that other creatures may possess ego, values, outlook, and the ability to communicate, though they may be incapable of audible speech." The tones of ecocriticism are there in the passage and the belief system the tiger has only the body of a tiger or any animal form, but he has the same soul that men possess. Here Narayan stresses the Hindu philosophy of the 'Oneness of the Soul."*

Together with these myths, parables, and legends are emblems and embodiments of accumulated mass wisdom and collected knowledge inherited with ages and cast a light on the social customs, cultural life, and their *Ethos* and practices, rituals, and rights by Narayan. Moreover, they serve as a perennial source in literature acting as archetypes and the virtue of never growing old, inspiring artists like Narayan.

The fictional locale of Malgudi also grows through the change from Malgudi's innocence to Malgudi's experience, just as a character's subtle growth in an episodic manner. The colonial impact can be seen in Malgudi, notably the transition in the early nineteenth century from the publication of 'Swami and Friends to a small city buzzing with nightlife, as introduced in 'The Vendor of Sweets'. The influence of British rule can be felt in the small village of Malgudi on administration and education in the form of the Albert Mission College, The Municipal College, and The Englandia Banking Corporation. The impact can be felt in the subtle transformation from a simple agricultural community to an urban society, the weakening of British influence, and the regard of America as the new source

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of contemporary culture. Malgudi witnesses change not only in the Indian way of life but also in the contemporary world order as Mali in '*The Vendor of Sweets'* endeavours to launch his communication business by selling American fiction-writing machines. Here, we can find that in the centre of post-colonial literature, there lies an interrogation of colonialism which Narayan uses through the device of irony which is most prominent in his bag of narrative devices He uses it chiefly to show the contrast of the colonizers and the extent to which it has penetrated the thinking process of the native. Jagan interrogates his son Mali who wants to go to America to complete his book writing project: "America! Why America?... 'Going there to learn storytelling! He should rather go to a village granny, 'he said, all his patriotic sentiments surging. 'Did Valmiki go to America or Germany to write his Ramayana?"

In cultural and social realms, colonialism subverted established tradition, rejected native beliefs and customs as superstition, and finally ensured natives believed all this through Western imparted education. O.P Mathur quotes in his essay, *"The Guide: A Study in Cultural Ambivalence,"* "Narayan gives us a feel of life quivering hesitantly between tradition and modernity, east and west, inextricably mixed up in the minds of individuals……." We can find ample mindsets interfused with native mindsets through the potent weapon of Narayan's irony but having an amalgamation of moral visions and explicit profound humanism. This is evident in the masterpiece 'The Guide', which treats the impostor Raju turned into a saint, and his mask becomes a reality. Through the ironic life of Raju, Narayan wants to portray the Indian philosophy, unlike the Western context in which an individual can grow and develop if he dissociates himself from society. But in the traditional Indian belief system, if an individual dissociates himself from society, he ultimately comes to grief. Ultimately, when he realizes and takes society along with himself, he comes to the growth and development of His soul and peace. A.V Krishna Rao observes, "Symbol village Mangal, as well as Malgudi, signifies native strength, community strength, and continuity of tradition, the ecology of whole race with its inescapable influence on consciousness and elemental determinism of individual destiny…." Indeed, most of the novels of RK Narayan reveal the traditional world disorder caused by non-adherence to conventional norms and values, which leads to an adverse outcome. There is generally a flight, an uprooting, a disturbance of order followed by a return, a renewal, or a restoration of normalcy.

RK Narayan's writings are related to the post-colonial native's point of view. 'The Financial Expert 'can also be read as an excellent criticism of materialism, a Western ideal that never got favor in the Indian context. In traditional Indian culture, money is only a means not an end. Making a comparison between American and Indian ideals concerning a man's life he said to an American lady, "I definitely feel man to man, an average American is materialistic in the best sense of the term – work, wages, good wife, good life -are all but his main interests, while an Indian will be bothering about the next life also in addition to all this." In Narayan's writings, post-colonialists capture the strategies of resistance, negotiation, and cultural assertion that countries such as India adopted by reconstructing the Indian tradition of using mythological incidents and situations. His works abound with the frank use of Indian superstition, religious beliefs, ceremonies, and customs. Also, his works speak up for a great ethical and moral system of self-discipline, non-violence, renunciation, incarnation, rebirth, and the law of Karma.

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